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Tourists' consumption and interpretation of sport event imagery

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Abstract

In an era when popular and mass cultures are positioned further up the symbolic hierarchy, sport events are deemed by cities to be a valuable image or branding tools. Event strategies are often justified by their envisaged image effects and the celebrities, iconic structures and media exposure associated with sport events means that they are viewed as being particularly effective for this purpose. This paper evaluates the image effects of strategies deployed by three English cities; Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield. Each of these cities has used a combination of regular sport fixtures, 'mega' sport events and event bids to further their reputations as tourist destinations. Semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of potential tourists were used to provide evidence of the impacts of these initiatives. Despite some participants making connections with traffic chaos and violence, in general sport events appear to have encouraged positive connotations amongst potential tourists, including modernity, progress and vitality. Events seem to be regarded favourably at a cultural level, generating widespread positive meanings even when individual preferences vary. This has positive implications for cities deploying sport events as re-imaging or branding tools.

Tourists' consumption and interpretation of sport event imagery

Introduction

Images play a fundamental role in determining the success of tourist destinations. They are particularly important to city destinations because they help to render large and complex built environments comprehensible. As Balibrea states, tourists require 'a coherent representation/meaning of the city, one that is easy and pleasant to consume' (2001:189). Municipal authorities and affiliated agencies have made concerted attempts to develop such imagery and using sport events as part of these efforts is an established practice with precedents dating back to classical civilizations (Favro, 1996). The strategic use of events has intensified in recent years, particularly amongst post-industrial cities aiming to acquire a share of the urban tourism market. Associated academic analyses have concentrated on the production and dissemination of imagery. This over-emphasis on encoding, means that the effects of sport-related imagery are not properly understood, particularly as there are 'inherent discrepancies between its encoded and decoded forms' (Whitelegg, 2000:806). Several authors recognise the need for more research on the consumption of event imagery. Chalip et al. state that 'more work is needed to identify and explore the way that event audiences construct and interpret what they see, hear and read about the host destination' (2003:229). Richards and Wilson reaffirm this by stating that 'the image effects of events on their host cities per se have not been examined much in research thus far' (2004:1935).

The aim of this study is to address this lack of research into the consumption and interpretation of sport event imagery by exploring if and how event strategies affect the city images held by potential tourists. The findings presented here constitute one part of a wider research project which evaluated the image effects of sport initiatives (see Smith, 2005a). This paper focuses on holistic image effects, or the effects on the overall image of

a destination, rather than attribute-based images of individual destination features (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; 1993). Therefore, more specific impacts, such as the modification of the city's reputation as a sporting venue, are not considered here. The objectives of this paper are to identify if events pervade images of city destinations; to evaluate the role of event initiatives in any recent changes to those images; and to analyse how sport event imagery is interpreted by tourists more generally. This should help to advance understanding of how sport events affect city images.

City re-imaging

Although based on the more established practice of civic boosterism, the practice of city 're-imaging' came to the forefront of urban policy in the 1980s as cities attempted to deal with various economic and social crises. Essentially, it formed a 'new right' capitalist discourse (Philo and Kearns, 1993), where places were commoditised and expected to compete for a share of footloose investment. As a discourse, re-imaging does not merely reflect practice, has helped to steer urban governance. This has proved controversial, particularly as themes and initiatives have been deployed that ignore or sanitize a city's heritage and consciousness (Boyle and Hughes, 1991). Re-imaging is also associated with 'trickle-down' economics and autocratic planning; approaches now widely condemned for failing to benefit the citizens most in need of assistance. As a result, critiques of re-imaging strategies have emerged that question their ideological basis, their socially regressive consequences and their highly speculative effects (Griffiths, 1998).

Although they are also used to facilitate local participation, celebration and income generation, sport events and associated facilities are increasingly deployed by cities as re-imaging tools (Smith, 2001). As Whitelegg identifies, sport 'acts as a central, rather than a

peripheral component in the restructuring of urban image' (2000:803). Although examples are apparent across the globe, sport re-imaging seems to be most prevalently pursued in the United States. Here, the large number of undifferentiated cities, plus the limited availability of sport franchises, has given sport a prominent role in civic boosterism. Cleveland and Atlanta are two US cities that have relied extensively on sport events in strategies to revive downtown areas (Austrian and Rosentraub, 2002). In his review of initiatives adopted by Atlanta, Newman (2002) suggests such approaches are based on the belief that sport facilities and events can resurrect the historical association between business, recreation, tourism and downtowns. Perhaps the most famous of the US examples is Indianapolis, where public officials and private entrepreneurs collaborated to use sport events as a foundation for a post-industrial future (Schimmel, 1995). The city is now 'widely perceived as a sports hub', a reputation that has assisted wider image objectives (Euchner, 1999:228). Euchner suggests that this success is due to Indianapolis's 'creativity in defining itself as the amateur sport capital of the world', and because of the city's 'early commitment' to the sports strategy (1999:227). These factors have allowed Indianapolis to distinguish itself from other cities, even in an era when stadium developments and other sport initiatives are seen as a contributor, rather than an exception, to urban homogenisation (Harvey, 1989).

In contemporary research publications analyses of re-imaging are now supplemented by those which use the terminology and theoretical basis of city 'branding'. Greenberg gives a clear indication of how she interprets this activity: 'I would like to call this simultaneous marketing and production of a monolithic, consumer-orientated version of the urban imaginary the branding of the city' (Greenberg, 2000:229). Within destination image research the concept of branding is used in two different ways. The first involves analysing

the relationship between cities and established consumer brands. In recent years the distinction between cities and such brands has been eroded due to various initiatives which aim to use brands to boost city images and vice versa. For example, corporations have begun to appreciate the value of establishing brand locations, creating urban ‘destinations’ that exist as an amalgam of corporate premises, visitor attractions and branding tools (Mikunda, 2004). In a sport context, the emergence of ‘Nike Towns’ is an example of this trend. Simultaneously, conventional places are being increasingly marketed by linking them to corporate brands and cultural ‘franchises’ (Evans, 2003; Richards and Wilson, 2004). Examples include Bilbao’s agreement with the Guggenheim Foundation and the development of branches of London’s museums and galleries in other UK cities. Evans (2003) terms this ‘hard branding’, which he sees as an attempt to capitalize on commodity fetishism and to extend brand life, geographically and symbolically. This is relevant to sport events as the strategic use of the Olympic Games and other established event brands by host cities is an example of ‘hard branding’. This was highlighted perfectly when London 2012 won ‘sports brand of the year’ at the 2006 Sport Industry Awards. Hannigan suggests that the whole concept of branding is particularly relevant to sport because of its ‘rosters of high octane celebrities’ (2003:352). Correspondingly, some of the events literature has attempted to conceptualise the effects of events using references to branding. For example, Chalip et al. (2003) view sport re-imaging as an exercise in co-branding, where success depends upon the harmonization of the destination image and the event image.

The second way branding is used in destination image literature is as a broader concept, imported from marketing theory. In such analyses the focus is not the relationship between destinations and established brands, but on creating a destination brand using various

conceptual models and schema. This type of brand building can also be linked to sport events. Indeed, several cities have deployed sport as the main theme of their branding. Kurtzman notes that Perth, Australia, has marketed itself as the ‘City of Sporting Events’, while Lake Placid is promoted as the ‘Winter Sports Capital of the United States’ (2001:19). Edmonton’s marketing slogan; ‘City of Champions’ (Hinch and Higham, 2003), and Sheffield’s strategic use of its designation as a ‘National City of Sport’ (Smith, 2001) are further examples of this type of approach.

The interpretation of sport re-imaging

The discussion above has explained how sport events have been deployed to achieve destination image and branding objectives. Yet, the specific purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of sport event imagery. Therefore, prior to the discussion of the research methods and findings it is also important to introduce ideas associated with the consumption and interpretation of sport imagery. The effectiveness of sport events as image or branding tools can perhaps be explained by the values attached to contemporary sport. Rowe asserts that sport provides a potent symbolic theme because of its associations with ‘universalism, transcendence, heroism, competitiveness, individual motivation and teamship’ (1995:138). There is certainly evidence that staging sport events can provide image benefits (Smith, 2005a). Ritchie and Smith’s (1991) research regarding the city of Calgary, the host of the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, suggests that a sport event can influence people’s awareness and image of a city destination. Nevertheless, the authors suggest that municipal/tourism managers in a city must anticipate a certain rate of image and awareness decay if steps are not taken to keep links between sport and the city visible (Ritchie and Smith 1991).

It is important to recognise that not all the meanings generated by sport events are compatible with the images cities want to project. An example is provided by Rowe and McGurk (1999) who evaluated the relationship between sport and the image of Newcastle, Australia. This city enjoyed substantial media attention after its Rugby League team won a National Cup Final. Using a rather convoluted analogy, the media were keen to draw parallels between the determination of the city's victorious team, and that of its blue-collar workforce. The resultant representation of Newcastle as a masculine, working class city, projected an image that was 'heavily reliant on the very properties that urban modernizers are attempting to de-emphasize' (Rowe and McGurk, 1999:137). This case highlights that, although cities are keen to promote sporting links, it is usually a highly sanitized representation that is adopted. Regular events and established teams are sometimes conspicuously absent from official sport re-imaging or branding initiatives. Therefore, whilst Higham (1999:89) contends that cities need to 'develop a greater understanding of the tourism development potential of existing/regular sport events and competitions', the need for a certain type of imagery customised to the 'right sort of people' suggests that this may be difficult to achieve. As Laurier states 'there is nothing more useless to a city-seller than a working class city that is still working class' (1993:276).

The research of Chalip et al (2003) also raises questions about compatibility of sport event imagery with destination image objectives. Their study revealed that images of the Gold Coast's natural environment were affected negatively by a Motor Race staged in the destination. This was caused by the incongruence of the event with this particular dimension of image (Chalip et al., 2003). There are other, perhaps more obvious, instances where sport initiatives have not delivered the images envisaged by city elites. The 1996 Olympic Games hosted by Atlanta, USA, demonstrated that logistical problems and

security incidents can erode the benefits of staging a major sport event. Paradoxically, Whitelegg (2000) suggests that it was Atlanta's prioritization of image benefits, at the expense of the 'nitty-gritty' of the Games, that resulted in these problems. This potential for negative publicity leads Higham to assert that cities staging major events 'stand to lose more than they can gain in terms of destination image' (1999:84). Alongside concerns associated with one-off 'mega' events, regular sport provision may also generate problematic images. Nielsen suggests that the relationship between sport and the city is often characterised by 'despair, conflict and chaos, as we know from the hooliganism of the stadium and the traffic chaos of the stadium parking lot' (1995:26). Therefore, cities aiming to produce long term event imagery need to recognise the possibility that undesirable meanings can be also be engendered.

Conceptual framework

The lack of research into the consumption of event imagery means that there are few established ways of conceptualising associated effects. Therefore, it is necessary to draw upon the general destination image literature to assist this endeavour. Unfortunately, a large proportion of this work aims to analyse what images currently exist, rather than evaluating image change, or the image effects of specific re-imaging initiatives. One of the few exceptions is the work of Richards and Wilson (2004). They use an established conceptualisation by identifying the effects of a cultural event on separate (designative and appraisive) image components. In a paper concerning the re-imaging of Barcelona, Smith (2005b) also discusses this established distinction and uses it to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to understand the potential effects of contemporary re-imaging. The framework is particularly relevant to the present study as it allows

consideration of the effects of both official and un-official re-imaging, important when considering sport initiatives which may be examples of either (or both).

The basic premise of the framework is that holistic image enhancement can be achieved through two general mechanisms. First, a ‘synecdochical’ effect where specific events are used directly by potential tourists to represent the city as a whole. This is linked to the established tradition of analysing what tourists know about a city (the designative or cognitive image), but restricts the analysis to influential holistic imagery, rather than addressing wider knowledge which may not necessarily be important to overall images. A second, more subtle, influence occurs when events connote values and associations that then become attached to the city, and thus influence how the city is imagined (Smith, 2005b). This has obvious synergies with established analyses of appraisive city images. These two processes are outlined in more detail below:

Synecdoche

‘Synecdoche’ is the rather ugly term for instances where a part of something is used to stand for the whole. This concept has particular resonance for city images. As Tuan (1977) states, the construction of holistic images involves reducing the complexity of an urban area into simplified representations that encapsulate the whole city. Monuments such as the Eiffel Tower, or silhouettes such as the famous skyline of New York, are examples of this phenomenon. Because of their media exposure, contemporary significance and popular acclaim, sport initiatives may provide such imagery. Indeed, some commentators imply that synecdoche is specifically applicable to sporting icons. Karp and Yoels (1990:91) state that ‘just as New York’s skyline, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge or the French Quarter in New Orleans both identify cities and become the source of people’s

identification with the city, so do sport teams'. Similarly, Bale (1993:3) observes that 'it is the floodlights of the stadium, not the spire of the cathedral that more often than not act as urban landmarks and points of reference'. Accordingly, staging sport events in iconic arenas may allow cities to develop new synecdochical images that represent the whole city. This effect is explained further by Richards and Wilson (2004). They assert that events can supply 'a source of spectacle which adds to the image value of a landmark' or be used as a 'platform for creating landmarks'(Richards and Wilson 2004: 1931/2). Events may also generate enactive city images without necessarily relying on physical icons, where memorable moments provide lasting holistic impressions. Therefore, when assessing the impact of events on city images it is important to address synecdochical effects.

Connotation

Alongside synecdochical processes, it is proposed that certain connotations generated by sport initiatives can influence holistic images. Therefore, although resultant images may not refer directly to sport events, they may be influenced significantly by certain connotations generated by them. Several commentators note that sport has come to symbolise abstract concepts such as machismo (Schimmel, 1995), modernity (Nielsen, 1995), progress (Rowe, 1995), national identity (Blain et al., 1993) and violence (Baudrillard, 1993). Raitz (1997) is confident that sport does have the capacity to influence perceptions of cities via symbolic associations. According to Raitz, the sport venue may become a symbol of imagined ideals, for example 'the pastoral in the midst of a gritty city' (Raitz, 1987:7). However, it would appear that many post-industrial cities use sport events to generate more dynamic meanings such as the 'transcendence of the old' (Rowe, 1995:137) and to 'popularise sometimes obscure notions of progress' (Rowe, 1995:138).

Therefore, it is also important to analyse the symbolic qualities of sport events, in order to understand the connotations generated.

Method

Assisted by the conceptualization of image change detailed above, the present study aims to evaluate how sport events and associated initiatives influence holistic city images held by potential tourists. The strategies adopted by three English cities - Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield - have been analyzed to provide indications of such effects. The cities were chosen as there is significant evidence that they have deliberately used sport events to enhance their image (Loftman and Nevin, 1996; Smith, 2005a).

The case studies

Over the past twenty years, **Birmingham** has aimed to become a city capable of attracting and entertaining visitors. This ambition has been supported by several major sport initiatives, including the city's bid to host the 1992 Olympic Games, an annual 'Super Prix' motor race around the city's streets, and the construction of the National Indoor Arena (NIA). This Arena has enabled the city to stage a number of high profile sport events, including Davis Cup tennis and international indoor athletics. According to several commentators, Birmingham's image changed markedly because of the implementation of these and various other initiatives introduced during the 1980s (Lister, 1991). Smyth (1994:180) observes that during this period Birmingham used a 'tripartite thrust' of business tourism, arts and sports to promote the city. The city asserts in its Strategic Plan 2005-2010 that; 'developments in the arts, sport and leisure have been a key part of Birmingham's renaissance over the last twenty years, helping to establish and sustain Birmingham's image as a modern and creative city' (2005:12). Thus it seems Birmingham

sees modernity and creativity as two connotations that sport event initiatives may have helped to cultivate. According to the city's Principal Officer – Sport (now Chief Executive of UK Sport) Richard Callicott, the mere association of sport with the city can generate positive feelings, such as excitement (Personal Communication 1999). Callicott also feels that sport initiatives can become effective agents of image change, provoking associations with 'dynamism, excitement, internationalism, athleticism' and a 'warm welcome'.

Manchester has adopted number of regeneration schemes in recent years, many of which have been event-led. The city submitted high profile bids for the 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games and these bids resulted in a series of new facilities, including the National Cycling Centre (NCC) and the Manchester Evening News (MEN) Arena. Seemingly, these new arenas were designed to have a synecdochical impact. Shortly after the opening of the city's MEN Arena, the City Council felt that it had provided 'one of Manchester's newest 21st century landmarks' (Manchester City Council 1996:43). Partly due to these new facilities, Manchester was awarded the 2002 Commonwealth Games. This event stimulated the development of a 'SportCity' zone in a previously dilapidated area of East Manchester. This area now contains a 45,000-seat stadium, a tennis centre, field hockey pitches and a 6,000-seat athletics stadium. In a report summarizing the outcomes of the Games, it was concluded that 'Manchester has been placed on the international map as a quality venue increasing the international reputation for Manchester as a vibrant multi-cultural city' (Manchester City Council, 2002:28). So it seems the city sees vibrancy and multi-culturalism as connotations that have been generated by this event. However, the city implied that this event marked the start of a reimagining/rebranding campaign rather than the culmination of one, concluding that; 'Manchester now has the opportunity to rebrand and reposition the city and region in light of the success of the Games' (Manchester City

Council, 2002:28). It should be noted that the fieldwork for the present study was undertaken before the Commonwealth Games took place and before the new stadium was officially opened. Therefore the post-Games effects are not addressed in this paper. However, the impending arrival of the event meant it was addressed by some interviewees.

Since its decision to host the 1991 World Student Games (WSG), sport and events have been cornerstones of **Sheffield's** urban regeneration strategy. Approximately £147 million of public money was spent on developing the facilities required for the WSG, funding the construction of a new swimming complex, a new indoor arena and a 25,000-seat athletics stadium in the Don Valley (Foley, 1991). During preparations for the event, members of Sheffield City Council's Regeneration Committee highlighted the envisaged synecdochical impact by stressing the pertinence of the images presented by the old and new Don Valley, comparing the former corridors of blazing steel with the lights of the new athletics stadium (Goodwin 1993:154). In the post-Games period, the city has attempted to use these facilities and its official designation as a 'National City of Sport' to promote the city to tourists. Richard Caborn, a local Member of Parliament, and UK Government Minister for Sport, recently contended that 'Sheffield has become a leading model not just in the UK, but worldwide for staging high quality events' (insidethegames, 2006:7). The city now hosts approximately 35 major sporting events every year (Sheffield City Council, 2006). This goes some way to justifying the expectations of the city council's deputy leader who stated in 1990 that 'long after the Student Games are over, the world class venues we are providing will enable us to attract major sporting events, with all the benefits that will bring to the city and its image' (The Times 8/2/1990). Although never clearly articulated, much of the rhetoric surrounding the WSG suggests the objective was to connote

modernity and progress, communicating Sheffield's envisaged transformation 'from a city of the past to a city of the future' (Sheffield City Press 20/11/89).

The interviews

To evaluate the effects of the initiatives outlined above, potential tourists were interviewed to elicit images of the three cities and interpretations of sport event imagery. Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method. In such an approach, 'questions are normally specified, but the interviewer is free to probe beyond the answers' (May, 1997:111). This method allows respondents to answer questions on their own terms, something that is often restricted in a structured interview or questionnaire survey. A conventional research instrument was used, involving a standardised schedule with the use of associated prompts. This meant that the approach adopted differed greatly from 'focused interviews' (May, 1997; Flick, 1998), which are essentially unstructured, informal and unstandardised (May, 1997:112). The focused interview was not employed in the present study because many interviewees were unfamiliar with the three cities under consideration and therefore unable to talk about them at length,

The interview schedule was divided into two sections (see appendix). The first part attempted to elicit general city images and perceptions of image change from potential tourists without any mention of sport by the interviewer. This meant that any references to sport events at this stage could be interpreted as evidence of their influence on holistic city images. In the second part of each interview, sport was explicitly mentioned and interviewees were asked about the links between cities and sport and how and why they thought sport events influenced their images of cities. This method of establishing general images and then focusing on a particular dimension of image relevant to the subject at the

heart of the study parallels the work of Richards and Wilson (2004) who used a similar approach to assess the impact of Rotterdam's Capital of Culture event in 2001.

The selection of interviewees

Interviews were conducted with 'potential tourists', rather than tourists who had already decided to visit a particular destination. Potential tourists were defined as adults residing in areas of England where an overnight stay in each of the case study cities was a realistic possibility. This meant selecting interviewees from residential areas that were distant enough from the cities to deter day excursions and over-familiarity, but near enough to encourage short-break custom. A total of 54 interviews were conducted in nine electoral wards, from three different areas of England. These wards were selected by using data revealing the typical distances travelled by domestic tourists to UK short-break destinations. This information was used to establish zones of a standardized distance radiating from each of three cities. The aim was to select research interviewees who did not reside in these zones as it was presumed they would be more likely to be day excursionists, rather than short-break tourists. Interviewees were selected from three electoral districts located at points at the edge of these exclusion zones. The selection of districts on the edge of these zones allowed residents to be questioned about all three cities, as Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield are all within 76-200 miles of these sites, an optimum distance to encourage overnight visitation. Potential tourists were chosen from districts located where the arcs of the exclusion zones met. This is how Sample Electoral District 1 (Fenland) and Sample Electoral District 2 (Darlington) were identified. As the Manchester and Birmingham exclusion zones arcs meet at a point in rural Wales, a different district along the Birmingham arc was selected. This provided a site that was in England, and one that allowed a degree of contextual variation as it meant that research was conducted in one

urban district (Bristol), one rural district (Fenland) and one district exhibiting both rural and urban zones (Darlington). In each of these three districts, 18 separate individuals were interviewed. Therefore, in total, 54 interviewees participated in the research. Individual interviewees were selected from three specific electoral wards within each district. These wards were selected on the basis that they provided the best opportunity within each district to access a broad range of individuals from different socio-economic groups. Once these wards had been identified, interviewees were chosen by selecting names randomly from the relevant electoral registers. If those identified were not willing or present to participate, replacements were selected from a list of substitutes.

Although the total number of people involved in the research was relatively small ($n=54$), the aim was to provide reliable findings by generating a sample that was closely representative of the English population. To meet this objective, a quota sampling technique was employed in conjunction with the random selection of interviewees from electoral registers. The quotas were based on the age, gender and socio-economic profile of the English adult population. The latest census data was used to calculate the pro-rata number of individuals from each classification required to produce a representative sample of 18 interviewees in each Sample District. Once the required number of interviewees of a certain gender, age group or socio-economic class had been obtained, no further individuals displaying those characteristics were interviewed.

Interviews were undertaken in the participant's home and were recorded and later transcribed. The data was then analyzed using basic qualitative data analysis procedures as suggested by Dey (1993). Accordingly, the researcher spent time familiarising himself with the information obtained, before establishing categories, themes and patterns. A

rudimentary coding system was then devised and any emergent ideas, explanations and relationships were tested by returning to the data.

Sport events and the images of the three cities

The findings of the present study suggest that recent sport initiatives have not been a significant agent of Birmingham's recent image change. None of the interviewees cited recent sport events when justifying why their image of Birmingham had changed over recent years, whilst only two interviewees specifically mentioned sport events when detailing their holistic images of Birmingham. No interviewees cited the city's bid for the 1992 Olympic Games in the unprompted section of the interviews, suggesting that this bid has had little influence on Birmingham's contemporary holistic image. Only one interviewee suggested that events had affected their image of the city. In a question relating to another city, this person indicated that they recognised Birmingham's general efforts to attract sport events, and felt that they had contributed to the enhancement of the city's image. Other recollections of recent sporting events in Birmingham were not always as positive. When asked about their visual image of the city, one interviewee gave the following response:

‘Well, the only thing that I see when I think of Birmingham is some motor race that they have round the middle of the city, round the Bullring or something, but it looked like a concrete monstrosity from the 1960s and 1970s. It didn't enhance the way in which I viewed the city, that's for sure’.

Interviewee 12

Therefore, although events can provide important synecdochical images, these representations are not necessarily positive. Without wanting to overstate the importance of one individual's viewpoint, there are three additional implications of these comments.

First, the inherent appraisal of the urban environment encapsulated within this synecdochical image problematises the distinction between synecdoche and connotation as cited in the conceptual framework. Second, it demonstrates that sport events can help to generate synecdochical images, but this may not simply involve the direct use of sporting phenomena as synecdoches. Instead sport events can sometimes provide the vehicle for communicating other synecdochical images of a city. This matches Richards and Wilson's (2004) explanation of the role of events in creating synecdoches outlined earlier. Third, as the motor race was discontinued several years prior to the interviews, the comment also highlights the potential durability of sport event imagery.

In general, the synecdochical effects of Birmingham's event-re-imagining are unremarkable. However, there is some evidence that the NIA has infiltrated the way in which the city is perceived as a whole. Four interviewees mentioned the NIA when discussing their general holistic image of the city, including two when asked to describe the picture of the city that they had in their mind. It was unclear to what extent these perceptions were generated by sport events staged in the Arena, particularly as several interviewees mentioned the milieu of the NIA rather than any enactive memories of specific events staged there. The only specific references to actual events were references to the NIA's role as the venue for the popular television programme (and pseudo sport event) 'Gladiators'.

The semi-structured interviews began with the question, 'What comes to mind when you think of the city of?' When asked this question with reference to Manchester, 23

interviewees responded by mentioning something linked to football in general, or Manchester United Football Club in particular. Several interviewees mentioned the football club as a fundamental reason for visiting the city, a viewpoint neatly encapsulated below:

‘I mean most people who go there want to go down to the football club, just to say they have been and seen it, even if they are not actually supporters. The club is bigger than the city now, well basically the club is the city’.

Interviewee 43

This view suggests that for some, the football club is not merely a synecdoche for Manchester, but an important metonym. In examples of more conventional synecdoche, two interviewees stated that their visual image of the city was a depiction of the Old Trafford football ground. Therefore, sport provides an important synecdoche for the city, but these images are dominated by established football icons. Indeed, the recent event initiatives were not cited by any of the 54 interviewees when they revealed what they associated Manchester with, and were not apparent in any of the mental pictures of the city elicited. This suggests a very limited synecdochical impact.

Five interviewees did refer to mega-events to justify perceptions that their image of Manchester had improved in recent years. These responses suggest that event associations have generated some attractive connotations. The most positive response came from interviewee 2, whose views allude to connotations of modernity and progress:

‘For me it always seems to be a city that is going places. I don’t know what it is, there always seems to be things being built, there is the new Olympic area at one end, they are building a new athletics stadium, they are going for the Commonwealth Games, they were going for the Olympics and so I think it is quite a thriving city. So I get an impression of it as fairly modern, fairly up to date’.

Interviewee 2

Other potential tourists were more specific about the effects of event bids and indicated that their images of Manchester had improved because of associated physical changes to the city. Several interviewees stated the initiatives had encouraged them to think that Manchester was now a more attractive city destination. This was mainly due to inferences that physical regeneration would automatically accompany events and event bids. For example, interviewee 35 stated: ‘Didn’t they put in for the Olympic thing? So I mean they must have improved it to get people interested in that’.

Therefore, holistic image change does appear to have been assisted by the city’s various sport event initiatives. This has been achieved through connotations of physical improvements to the urban environment. Nevertheless, established sporting associations seem to be much more influential in determining Manchester’s destination image. This perhaps raises questions about the relationship between unofficial/official and old/new event imagery (Smith, 2005a). It also helps to reaffirm Quilley’s assertion that in Manchester, the ‘soft city’ of popular culture has been as important as the ‘hard city’ of flagship developments in securing the city’s revival (2000:610).

The interviews revealed that event initiatives have enhanced Sheffield's image, albeit to a limited extent. A significant number of potential tourists referred to sport when outlining their holistic images of Sheffield. Reaffirming findings observed with respect to Manchester, these were mainly references to the city's football connections. Indeed, the two recurring images of Sheffield were of the city's steel industry and its two football clubs. However, there were also several interviewees who cited recent event initiatives in their holistic images. Some mentioned the World Student Games, whilst others mentioned the new swimming complex, athletics track and indoor arena. In all, nine interviewees made some mention of the recent sport initiatives in detailing their image of the city as a whole. As was established in relation to Manchester, a large number of these references were forthcoming when interviewees were asked whether the city had become a more or less attractive place to visit over the recent years. However, when asked explicitly about their visual images of the city, no interviewees mentioned recent sport events. Only one interviewee mentioned a recent event initiative in detailing immediate associations with Sheffield. This suggests that recent sport initiatives have not produced a revised synecdochical representation of the city.

Two interviewees used sport initiatives to support their perception that Sheffield has become a more attractive place to visit over recent years. Partly reflecting the connotations generated by Manchester's initiatives, interviewee 37 felt that the sport initiatives implied that the city was more 'modern' and suggested that it was making strenuous efforts to improve itself. Three others cited Sheffield's new sport facilities as exemplifying the efforts to improve the city. However, two of these responses were tinged with negative connotations as both alluded to the negative publicity which surrounded the financing of

the WSG. Therefore, although the sport initiatives may have become part of potential tourists' holistic images, the resultant images are not entirely positive. It is important to emphasise that negative comments regarding the WSG initiatives were only communicated by a minority of the interviewees. Indeed, one interviewee stated that they felt that the World Student Games 'seemed to go quite well' (Interviewee 34). However, any negativity is a concern, and emphasises that unhelpful publicity can all too easily distort image communication to potential tourists. This is acknowledged by interviewee 38 who, when asked whether sport facilities/events in general changed their impression of a city, stated:

‘I mean it can work the other way, if an event is not staged very well then you would think hang on I am not coming back here again’.

Interviewee 38

Cities attempting to publicise themselves via high profile events must be aware that if the event and the information about an event is not properly managed, the effects on city image could be detrimental. This reflects Higham's pessimistic comments cited previously (1999).

General findings

Alongside analysing holistic images of the three cities, the research also aimed to explore more generally the way potential tourists interpret sport event initiatives.

According to many of the interviewees, the primary effect of sport events is that they help to boost their awareness of a host city. This is not quite the same as sport initiatives modifying city images, but as Gartner (1996) suggests, awareness building is an important (preliminary) stage of the image formation process. Some interviewees felt that this

enhanced profile resulted in their greater interest in a city, although they were not necessarily more inclined to think about it positively. For example, one interviewee stated:

‘When the Olympics are on you usually see a bit of the city itself and that makes you more interested, so maybe. I mean it doesn’t change the way you think about it, it just makes you more interested in it’.

Interviewee 45

Although the event strategies adopted by Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield do not appear to have resulted in significant synecdochical effects, other comments by interviewees suggest that events can affect city images in this manner. Two interviewees felt that sport events had enabled them to generate sophisticated visual images of cities. These perspectives are detailed below:

Interviewer: Does it [sport] change the way which you think about a city?

Interviewee 19: Yeah, I think it can because there is always the associated tableaux of these places and you get to see these places you wouldn’t normally see, you get to see everything in one go. If you have an eventThe Great North Run, [a half-marathon staged in the North East of England], that sort of thing, it obviously pushes pictures of the place to the fore in your mind. You can see that area and you can imagine what that area is like.

Interviewer: Do you think that staging major sport event affects the way in which you view that city as a whole?

Interviewee 38: Yes, I think it does make a difference. I mean I always remember a place through an occasion, I think about places because of things I have done there or things I have been to and sport is a good example. People remember a city in conjunction with that sporting occasion. I mean if you go to Newcastle and watch the road race that is how you remember the city, because of the special occasion and the way it is portrayed; the same with the tall ships, you remember it and you will always remember that version of the city. The image of the city becomes what you saw there and then.

These views suggest that people attending memorable sport events store associated memories, which can become synecdoches for a city. There is also evidence from the interviews that merely watching sport events on television, rather than actually attending them in person, can induce similar effects. For example, participant 43 felt that; ‘it [a sport event] takes you to that city in your mind when you are watching some of these things’. Participant 37 found it refreshing to see some positive aspects of cities on the television rather than what he termed tactfully, the more ‘colourful parts’.

Alongside awareness building, and the potential for synecdoche, there were indications that holistic images could be enhanced by the connotations generated by sport initiatives. One of the most frequently expressed views was that cities staging major sport events were, ‘ambitious’, ‘progressive’ and ‘pro-active’. Interviewee 5 epitomised this stance, asserting that the implementation of sport initiatives;

‘....makes me think that its an exciting place, with a bit of spark, a bit of ambition and a bit more interesting than other places’

For a small number of interviewees, bidding for, or staging sport events also inferred that other aspects of the city would have also been subject to improvement, thus producing a more attractive urban destination. The excerpt below illustrates such inferences:

‘It means that cities are trying to do something for the city, bids for things like the Olympics involves more than just sports stadia, it makes cities look at the whole infrastructure and the services they are providing. So yes, they must have looked at all aspects of the city, how it looks, what the city is providing, so it probably makes me think of it in a more positive way’.

Interviewee 19

The most oft-cited connotation generated by sport initiatives was the perception that they somehow made the city more interesting (Interviewees 5, 26, 39, 45, 49). Interviewees were prompted to try and justify this interpretation and one explanation is cited below:

Interviewer: Do you think that staging major sport events in a city affects the way in which you view that city as a whole?

Interviewee 49: Yes I think it does. I think it’s a profile thing again. Let’s say in Sheffield if there was a major event happening I would be interested in going to Sheffield and more interested in the city generally and people would make more of an effort to go to Sheffield and see what the city has to offer, well I know I would.

Interviewer: Why would you be more interested in the city?

Interviewee 49: Because of its new buildings, I mean Sheffield is quite an old city and has a lot of old buildings, the new things are new, bright. I mean when I think of Aberdeen [a city in Scotland] I think of granite. Aberdeen is the granite city and everything is made up of grey granite and it is grey. I think these cities need things that are new and bright, it's a psychological attraction, if you have got somewhere that is boring, dull, grey, you need something that is bright, colourful and new, yes, and high profile sport can give that to a city.

Although mentioned less frequently, interviewees also demonstrated a number of other ways that sport initiatives influence the holistic images of cities. Several interviewees thought they generated a feeling 'that you think that city has the edge over other cities' (Interviewee 20). Another felt that sport could make a city more fashionable: 'Yes, if there is a big event held there people are going to think it is a cool place to go' (Interviewee 29). Others indicated that sport added an extra dimension to a city (Interviewee 24) or that sport initiatives generated feelings that a city would be a more exciting place (Interviewee 5).

Although sport events generated positive connotations for the vast majority of interviewees, for some it had the opposite effect. The most common justification for a negative attitude towards sport was the inconvenience and violence associated with sport events. One interviewee justified this negative interpretation by stating that:

'The negative is when you know what has to be built to accommodate people at venues, the arena, car parks, people have to be moved away. There is also the menace that is associated with sport fans, that's the negative.'

This viewpoint reinforces the views of Nielsen (1995) who suggests that hooliganism and traffic chaos dominate the meanings generated by urban sport. Reaffirming this interpretation, one interviewee stated:

‘Oh, there was some press coverage last night on the [Football] World Cup possibly coming to England and them building a stadium in the suburbs here and really people were not very keen. It would depend on the sport. I mean football, I would be really personally against having it anywhere near my backyard, I don’t like the thuggery involved. The Olympics, I think that it is a lot of money for a short event. I’m not sure, I have very mixed feelings. When they are playing rugby in Bristol, it causes horrific jams all around when they are playing, it does give the city a profile, but there are plenty of other ways of doing that’.

These enduring associations with hooliganism may still be an obstacle to securing positive connotations from sport-related imagery. However, several interviewees indicated that they were confident that violence and hooliganism was gradually disappearing, which meant that sport was now a positive association for cities. This view is shared by Susan O’Shea (Principal Tourism Analyst, Birmingham City Council) who suggests that since 1996 sport has contributed to, and complemented, Birmingham’s wider cultural promotion, rather than contradicting it (Personal Communication, 1999).

The process of connotation ‘describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the user’ (Fiske, 1990:86). Therefore, how potential tourists relate event strategies to their own beliefs, motives and values is an important consideration. Unsurprisingly, there were several examples of individuals who were very interested in sport and who used their own individual preferences to justify their positive interpretation. Yet there were other instances where contradictory cultural and individual values were communicated simultaneously. This generated complex and ambiguous interpretations of sport event initiatives. For example, when asked to communicate their feelings about linking sport and the city, one interviewee stated:

‘It's hard to say sport is not positive, I mean it is obviously a good thing for the people who live there and sport is a positive thing in general I suppose, but for me I am quite neutral about it, because I am not interested in it.’

Interviewee 40

Therefore, amongst some individuals there appears to be an acceptance of the wider positive interpretation of urban sporting links, tempered by an individual apathy or personal dislike. In determining the connotations generated by sport it is important to look at both these dimensions. The findings show that despite certain individual motives, fears and reticence, linking sport and the city is generally perceived positively. However, interviewees were often unsure where this belief came from. Certainly, a number were unable to use their own personal interests to justify their positive attitude. This is exemplified by the two separate comments below:

‘I don’t know, it just is, really, for some reason it just feels quite positive even though I don’t like sport, you still have to say it is a positive thing for a city to be associated with’.

Interviewee 34

‘I mean I am not even a follower of sport or anything, but it is there all around you, its every day and you can’t avoid it. It is a positive thing and therefore it must give out positive feelings to people about a city.’

Interviewee 43

As these comments demonstrate, individual attitudes are eclipsed by the overriding acceptance of the dominant shared meaning. This has important implications for sport re-imaging. Even in the minds of people who do not express an individual interest in sport, sport re-imaging appears to generate positive connotations. This suggests that sport can generate favourable connotations amongst a wide range of different people with different interests.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to evaluate the effects of sport event strategies on the holistic images of city destinations. To address this objective, the strategies of Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield have been evaluated. The study has also looked more generally at the interpretation of urban sport initiatives to adjudge their likely image effects. Semi-structured interviews with 54 potential tourists in strategic locations have been used to accumulate this evidence. Although synecdochical effects have been minimal, and despite established sporting links overshadowing recent projects, there is evidence that sport

events and event bids have assisted Manchester's image change over recent years. The role of the Olympic bids in this image change seems to have been crucial. This suggests that competing for, but not necessarily winning, the right to stage mega-events, can be an effective re-imaging vehicle. Indeed, Manchester has benefited from its tenuous associations with the Olympic 'brand' even though its bid 'failed'. This perhaps confirms the value of 'hard branding' noted previously. There is also evidence that Sheffield's WSG initiatives have contributed towards the city's recent image change. In both Sheffield and Manchester, this has been achieved by generating feelings that these cities have undergone an associated programme of regeneration. Therefore, rather than abstract connotations, some of the most important effects noted here concern 'indexical' imagery (Pierce, 1931-58), causally generated by event strategies. This reaffirms Crewe and Beaverstock's assertion that 'it is to the combined analysis of material processes and symbolic representations that we must look in our search for understanding about the production and reproduction of place-based meanings' (1998:290). Birmingham's initiatives have not infiltrated the city's holistic image to the same degree, although it should be noted that Birmingham's sport re-imaging has been less intensive than that of Manchester and Sheffield, and a greater amount of time has passed since its key initiatives were instigated.

In the conceptual framework elucidated within the present study, it was proposed that sport has the potential and the capacity to influence holistic images; both directly through the development of new synecdochical images, and indirectly via the meanings generated by city - sport event associations. Therefore, it is useful to revisit these key ideas to explore whether they help to explain if and how sport initiatives affect city images. The study found that events and event bids in the three case study cities had not provided significant synecdochical tools. For example, Manchester's Olympic bids were not used by any

potential tourists to represent the city as whole. Similarly, no respondents used the WSG synecdochically to represent Sheffield, or the 1992 Olympic bid to represent Birmingham. However, some of the sport facilities affiliated to these events/event bids, such as the NIA in Birmingham were used in this manner. This suggests that sport facilities may be more effective than sport events as generators of synecdochical images. In the case of the NIA, this process was assisted by the milieu of the sport facility which seemingly assisted its entry into the tourist imagination. But the synecdochical qualities of sport events should not be automatically discounted just because of the impotency of initiatives associated with Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield. Interviewees indicated that other cities had staged sport events capable of providing synecdochical images.

The findings of this research suggest that sport events do generate positive connotations for the overwhelming majority of potential tourists. It also appears that a majority of the interviewees think that if they heard that a city had implemented sport initiatives their image of that city would be enhanced. In exploring the underlying explanation for these effects, it is apparent that sport initiatives can generate a range of connotations for cities including ambition, progression, improvement, newness, colourfulness and modernity. Sport initiatives appear particularly proficient as tools for connoting that a city is more 'interesting'. These positive readings of sport event re-imaging have been enabled by the positive meanings attached to the concept of sport in contemporary culture. Despite diverse individual attitudes to sport, this shared interpretation allows sport event imagery to generate consistently positive meanings amongst potential tourists, generating the capacity to enhance holistic city images.

The framework that has been used to evaluate these effects proved useful. Images are changed either by attaching positive connotations to cities, or by encouraging potential tourists to replace vague or negative synecdoches with positive ones. The study has revealed that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between these two types of image change, but addressing them as a guiding framework ensures that tourists are asked about the different mechanisms that could facilitate image modification. It improves existing approaches by suggesting how events may affect images, rather than simply identifying the image components affected. The present study evaluated effects by eliciting city images, but also by asking potential tourists about their interpretation of event imagery in general. Considering these indicators together can help both to establish, and to explain, image effects.

In qualifying the research findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. Although important indications as to the effects of event initiatives have been highlighted, much more evidence is needed to draw final conclusions about whether individual city images have changed because of sport events. Attempting to unravel the specific influence of events is beset with methodological difficulties and it is recognised that image change can only be fully understood using a pre-/post- test method which was not employed here. Furthermore, some of the findings were generated by asking interviewees what they would think if they had heard that a city was to stage a major sport event. Establishing this hypothetical scenario raises a number of issues. First, it assumes that interviewees would have heard of recent sport event initiatives, when in fact evidence suggests that a large proportion of people are unaware of them (Smith, 2005a). The perils of this assumption are exemplified by the thoughts of interviewee 42 who, when asked whether hosting sport events would change the way in which he thought about a city

stated, 'I think it does if I know about it, but you have to know it is going on' (Interviewee 42). The hypothetical nature of some of the questioning also removed the impact of 'noise' which would normally affect the interpretation of a message. Though interviewees may have indicated that their image would be changed by sport event imagery, prior knowledge of a specific city and the existence of other (possibly contradictory) messages transmitted at the same time may nullify the stated impact. This was acknowledged by interviewee 50 who stated that sport initiatives could change his perceptions 'but it depends if you already know the city'.

More research is still needed to reveal how the consumption of event imagery affects existing images of destinations and how it corresponds with the consumption of other city representations. Future research could develop the approach used in the present study by including a longitudinal dimension. It will always be difficult to separate out the effects of events from other influences, but longitudinal studies that address synecdoche and connotation would greatly improve existing approaches to event evaluation. Triangulating data by using quantitative techniques would also help to increase confidence in findings, particularly when trying to isolate specific causes of image change (see Smith, forthcoming). Future studies should also try to establish why, and in what circumstances, certain image effects occur; something only superficially addressed by the present study.

Outlook

Inspired by London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympic Games, Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield all continue to bid for sport events. Although for those associated with bids for the 1992, 1996 and 2000 Games, the capital's success may have been rather galling, all three cities have recently expressed their support for London's

Games. Each now seems intent on positioning itself to host training camps for athletes preparing for the 2012 Olympics, and all appear keen to capitalise on the wave of national sporting interest that should accompany the event. Demonstrating their ongoing commitment to an events strategy, delegations from Birmingham and Sheffield attended the recent 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games, seeking to learn lessons about staging events and to gain publicity for their own efforts. The head of the Sheffield delegation stated that they were in Melbourne ‘observing at first hand the requirements and expectations of hosting major international sporting competitions as well as raising the profile of Sheffield as a world class destination for sport’ (insidethegames, 2006:7). At the same event, Birmingham’s Head of Sport reaffirmed his commitment to a sport event strategy, stating that; ‘Birmingham has developed an excellent reputation for staging major sport events and needs to retain its competitive edge’ (insidethegames, 2006:7). It has tried to do this by staging a series of recent events, including the 2003 IAAF World Indoor Athletics Championships in March 2003. Birmingham will also stage the European equivalent in 2007, an event which is being billed as the only major sport event in the UK in the run up to 2012. Winning the right to stage this event has allowed the city to secure external funding to refurbish the NIA. Birmingham has also revealed its long term commitment to hosting sport events through its stated intention to bid for the 2022 Commonwealth Games. This aspiration illustrates the envy felt in Birmingham and Sheffield at the plaudits Manchester received for its staging of the 2002 precedent. Manchester is seeking to further capitalise, as evidenced by its self-promotion as ‘Sporting capital of the UK’ (Manchester City Council, 2006a), its ‘Festival of Sport 2006’ (Manchester City Council, 2006b) and its hosting of the Paralympic World Cup Games in 2005, 2006 and 2007 (Manchester City Council, 2006a). According to Manchester City Council, this means that in the years since the Commonwealth Games, the events staged by

the city 'have enhanced the city's reputation as a sporting capital' (2006a). Therefore, and reaffirming the findings of this study, Manchester leads the way as the UK's premier provincial sports city. But after its Olympic bids and Commonwealth Games, it may have exhausted the opportunities offered by sport mega-events. And although sport events are still a key theme within the latest strategic documents produced by Birmingham and Sheffield, there seems less appetite for mega-events and extensive sport re-imaging. Birmingham's Policy for Sport (1999) and the latest (West Midlands) Regional Development Strategy view sport as tool for addressing social exclusion and inequality within the city, rather than as an external marketing tool. In Sheffield, it is noticeable when entering the city that signs proclaiming it to be a 'National City of Sport' have been quietly removed. Negative publicity regarding the financial implications of the WSG still pervades the local press and the new incumbents of the Town Hall appear reticent to endorse sport initiatives associated with previous administrations. Yet globally there is still faith in the value of sport event re-imaging. Symbolic regimes still pervade urban governance and because of sport's symbolic potential, there is little chance that we will see an end, or even an interruption, to the urban tradition of using sport events to manipulate city images.

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Appendix

The Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

PART 1 Images of Birmingham / Manchester / Sheffield

1) What comes to mind when you think of the city of Birmingham?

Probes

Why do you say that?

What do you think that impression is based on?

2) Do you have a picture of Birmingham in your mind?

Probes

(If no) Nothing at all?

(If yes) Can you describe it to me?

Why do you think that particular picture exists in your mind?

What do you think that picture is based on?

3) Can you name any features or aspects of the city of Birmingham?

Probes

(If no) None at all?

(If yes) Why did you choose those particular features or aspects?

4) What is your impression of Birmingham as a place to visit?

Probes

Why do you say that?

What do you think that impression is based on?

5) Would you like to visit Birmingham for a weekend leisure break?

Probes

(If no) Why not?

(If yes) Why?

What would you like to do while you were there?

6) Do you think Birmingham has become a more or less attractive place to visit over the past ten years?

Probe - Why do you say that?

REPEAT FOR MANCHESTER AND SHEFFIELD
WITH ORDER OF CITIES ROTATING SYSTEMATICALLY TO AVOID
PRIORITISING ONE CITY OVER ANOTHER

PART II Sport

19) Do you think there are strong links between Birmingham and sport?

Probes

Why do you say that?

Do you think these links have become stronger or weaker over the past ten years? Why do you say that?

20) Do you think there are strong links between Manchester and sport?

Probes

Why do you say that?

Do you think these links have become stronger or weaker over recent years? Why do you say that?

21) Do you think there are strong links between Sheffield and sport?

Probes

Why do you say that?

Do you think these links have become stronger or weaker over the past ten years? Why do you say that?

22) Can you name any major sports stadia or facilities that have been built over the past ten years in Birmingham, Manchester or Sheffield?

Probes

Why did you choose those particular facilities?

How did you hear about them?

23) Can you name any major sport events that have been bid for by or staged in Birmingham, Manchester or Sheffield over the past ten years?

Probes

Why did you choose that event?

How did you know about the events/bids?

24) Which UK city outside London do you most closely associate with sport?

Probe

Why do you say that?

25) Do you think that strong sporting associations are a positive or negative aspect of cities?

Probe

Why do you say that?

26) Do you think that staging major sport events in a city affects the way in which you view that city as a whole?

Probe

Why do you say that?

27) How would the fact that a city has developed high quality sports facilities and stadia affect the chances of you visiting it in the near future?

Probe

Why do you say that?

Thank you for your time and assistance.

